DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 403 633 EA 027 854

TITLE	Two Perspectives on the Continuing Debate over School Choice. Dialogue Series, Number 13.
INSTITUTION	Pioneer Inst. for Public Policy Research, Boston, MA.
PUB DATE	Apr 96
NOTE	10p.
AVAILABLE FROM	Pioneer Institute for Public Policy Research, 85 Devonshire St., 8th Floor, Boston, MA 02109 (single copies free).
PUB TYPE	Collected Works - Serials (022) -- Collected Works - Conference Proceedings (021) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Academic Achievement; Access to Education; *Competition; Elementary Secondary Education; *Equal Education; *Free Enterprise System; Politics of Education; Program Effectiveness; Research Methodology; *Research Problems; *School Choice

ABSTRACT

In Pioneer Institute's November 1995 "Dialogue," nine school-choice advocates critiqued a draft manuscript of "Who Chooses, Who Loses? Culture, Institutions, and the Unequal Effects of School Choice," edited by Harvard professors Richard Elmore, Gary Orfield, and Bruce Fuller. This publication contains the response of Professor Fuller to the dialogue, along with a reaction by Terry M. Moe, senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University. Fuller argues that the Pioneer Institute invited only proponents of choice to join the conversation, that they disregarded the book's empirical findings, and that the programs described in the book were chosen on the basis of empirically sound evaluation. Moe asserts that the Harvard volume is not a true study, that it emphasizes the negative aspects of choice, and that it is biased against school choice. He argues that problems of inequality can be resolved through better program design. Two figures are included. An inset contains the response of Professor Paul Peterson to remarks made by Professor Fuller about Peterson's "Wall Street Journal" piece, in which Peterson praised a San Antonio voucher program. Peterson argues that Fuller's concern for selection effects in San Antonio contrast with his (Fuller's) disregard for selection effects in the Milwaukee program. (LMI)

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Pioneer Institute
for Public Policy Research

Dialogue

Number 13
April 1996

Two Perspectives on the Continuing Debate Over School Choice

In our November 1995 Dialogue, *"Responses to a Harvard Study on School Choice: Is It a Study at All?" we gathered nine school choice experts to critique a draft manuscript of* Who Chooses, Who Loses? Culture, Institutions, and the Unequal Effects of School Choice, *edited by Harvard Professors Richard Elmore, Gary Orfield, and Bruce Fuller. Upon receiving the* Dialogue, *Professor Fuller requested the opportunity to respond. In the following pages, Pioneer presents his response, along with a reaction by Terry M. Moe, senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University.*

Please, Can We Focus on Evidence?

By Bruce Fuller

Pioneer Institute's November 1995 *Dialogue* was dedicated to hearing from critics of Harvard's recent review of school choice programs. Our research group appreciates Pioneer's effort to stimulate civic debate on these new evaluation findings.

But the *Dialogue* was odd on two scores. First, only proponents of choice were invited to join the conversation. Nine advocates were invited to comment on our three-year research project. No critics of school choice were invited to join this chat among the already converted. Second, the Harvard project's central purpose was to review the most solid empirical work we could find, focusing on the local effects of variably constructed choice programs. We shared the entire book manuscript, containing ample empirical evidence. We held the (apparently idealistic) expectation that the Pioneer staff and their chosen commentators would *read* the empirical studies, not simply respond to the media summaries they so vociferously attacked. Sadly, many in Pioneer's corral of critics opted to simply raise the decibel level of the rhetoric, rather than address the evidence.

In our unrequited hope that the quality of debate can be raised, I want to recap the aims of the Harvard project and our core findings. The complete book

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is available from Teachers College Press, Columbia University, and I urge you to study the empirical findings. I also want to thank Charlie Glenn, Terry Moe, Diane Ravitch, Alfred Taubman, and others who have contacted us to more carefully talk through our findings—with the collective objective of improving how choice initiatives are structured in the future.

Background

In 1991, my colleagues Richard Elmore and Gary Orfield joined with me to invite researchers active in the school choice field to present their empirical findings at a seminar series. Our aim throughout has been to examine fine evaluation evidence on three specific issues:

- Which parents respond enthusiastically to choice options when they become available via magnet schools, voucher programs, or charter schools?
- Under liberalized market conditions, do inventive new forms of schooling arise, and which key actors help stimulate organizational innovation?
- What effects of choice schools are empirically observed, specifically in terms of parental satisfaction with new "choice schools" and in terms of student achievement gains?

These questions are central to the arguments advanced by choice proponents, and contested by opponents. They are questions that can be informed by empirical evidence. Our principal concern is *not* with issues of political philosophy or important normative questions around how to balance individual parent interests and the ever-slippery public interest. These are not settled by positivist findings. Our team's single aim was to assess available facts on the three *empirically assessable* questions.

Key Empirical Findings

Richard Elmore and I presented our findings at the annual meeting of the National Conference of State Legislatures, held last summer in Milwaukee. Three key findings proved to be most controversial. We showed how choice programs are quite popular, especially among working class and inner city parents who face low quality neighborhood schools. Despite this enthusiasm, however, no evidence is available to substantiate that children moving into "choice schools" are learning at a higher rate than those who remain in neighborhood schools. And inequities can result from choice programs, where parents already highly involved in their children's schooling (attending school meetings, checking their homework, for example) make better shoppers. Left behind in lousy neighborhood schools are children whose often impoverished parents may not have time or wherewithal to press their children to do well in school.

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A fourth finding, receiving less attention, is that the ability of local activists and educators to create exciting new schools depends heavily on prior levels of community organizing, the structure of the choice program, and levels of public subsidy. This is the missing link which explains why parents' enthusiastic response to choice does not automatically yield change inside classrooms where promised learning gains are not being observed. No one in the private sector argues that market conditions magically create effective firms. All sorts of internal organizational factors come into play. We have paid scant attention to the issue of *how* competitive pressures will lead to the crafting of exciting new schools.

A Flood of Criticism

Following public release of our findings we have been attacked in a number of ways. Our critics claim that the media emphasized the negative side of our findings. Or that this was not really a study (in Howard Fuller's words). Or that the authors are biased and

have a record of being anti-choice. Or that we selected choice programs with problems, not the "right programs," which are more effective. One critic in the Pioneer newsletter, Mary Anne Raywid, claimed our work does not meet academic standards of rigor. These are serious charges.

I must admit to being surprised by a portion of these slams, especially coming from choice advocates in university settings—critics who should abide by rules of evidence and logical argument. Indeed, I was hoping that critics would focus on the quality or limitations of the *evidence*. For example, we have repeatedly emphasized how much more evidence is needed before we can gain a clear understanding of how program features interact with local demographic and economic conditions, to yield variable effects.

But the rather low-brow vein of criticism, following release of our basic findings, has been more common than careful assessments of the evidence put forward. Civic debate over school choice and the future role of government in our society is of crucial importance. Scholars in particular should provide informed leadership, not reproduce unsubstantiated claims and good intentions not backed by evidence. We should relentlessly demand of politicians and activists that they produce evidence that backs their claims. When university-based advocates compromise this fundamental tenet of the academy, they contribute nothing new and simply undercut the public's hope that the university will enrich public discourse. Parenthetically, we should be just as tough on equally faith-filled advocates of "systemic school reform," or networks like the Coalition for Essential Schools. These opponents of choice genuflect just as frequently, as they pray that bureaucratic-driven reform will work.

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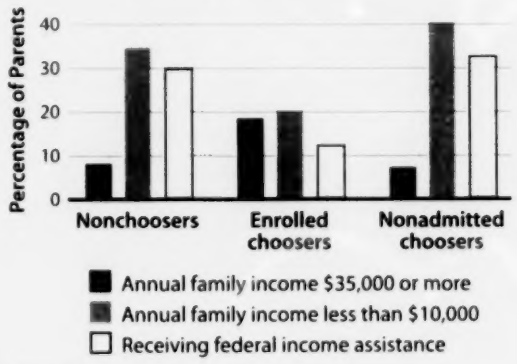
Political Rights vs. Empirical Effects

Choice starts with the philosophical question of whether a parent should have the political right to leave the neighborhood school and search for a better alternative. My own belief is that in a democratic society it is difficult to argue against this "right." But no part of our book takes a position on the normative question of whether and how this aspect of political authority should be altered. Democratic societies constantly struggle with how to properly balance the individualistic desires of citizens against a broader shared public interest.

Can Inequality Get Worse?

Some critics in the Pioneer *Dialogue* argued that the degree of inequality and segregation in American schools is so bad, we must try something new. This is not reassuring. If choice proponents are concerned with the likelihood of unequal results, let's work to honestly evaluate choice experiments: to assess the magnitude of the problem and figure out ways to minimize unfair effects. Joe Nathan and others point to the Cambridge "universal choice" option, where all parents express their top three preferred schools. But note that in Cambridge, public authority remains and

School Choice and Socioeconomic Standing in San Antonio



Source: Education Week, *November 8, 1995.*

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squarely in the picture to balance individual family preferences against the local community's shared interest in avoiding overcrowding at popular schools and in ensuring ethnic diversity within each school.

Local Effects

Please read the evidence reported in our book. Our critics are quick to read chapter titles and see which cities were included in the Harvard effort, including Detroit, Milwaukee, Montgomery County, and San Antonio. But these critics rarely work their way through the empirical results. I much prefer Terry Moe's thoughtful analysis and *informed* attack of our evidence—both the quality of what we review and what evidence does not yet exist. In the original Pioneer critique, Mr. Moe pointed out that test scores are not a complete measure of desired outcomes: "Many families are looking for a better moral climate, stronger discipline, safer schools, and more attention for their children. These things do not necessarily show up in test scores." Indeed, Milwaukee and San Antonio demonstrate how many black and Hispanic parents seek schools that have curricula focused on their own cultural heritage, language, and social mores. Bravo! Mr. Moe's critique opens up debate on how we can best assess the forms of learning that parents themselves value. We all learn from this level of debate.

Picking the "Right" Choice Programs

Our project can be fairly criticized for including an insufficient range of choice programs. We did our best to search out empirically sound evaluation studies, both qualitative and quantitative research. But we are constrained by the paucity of sound evaluations. Some experiments, like charter schools, are recent in origin. Equally troubling, however, is when loose assessments are bandied about as hard evidence. Reports coming from business financed groups in Milwaukee, for instance, attribute all sorts of student effects to their experience in choice schools, without even thinking about how to first control on the independent effects of family background factors. Harvard Professor Paul Peterson recently celebrated San Antonio's alleged achievement effects in *The Wall Street Journal*, without even acknowledging the sharp selection effect that confounds these findings. Pro-choice interest groups—if seriously concerned about the positive and negative effects of their programs—should work with technically able researchers. Hiring lobbyists to conduct "evaluations" undercuts the legitimacy of their own cause.

Risking Alienation

The scornful and imprecise character of a portion of our critics is personally distressing to me. I think you run the risk of alienating both political moderates and empirical scholars who heretofore have been agnostic toward school and family choice. Over the past five years, I have been studying the dynamics of the mixed preschool market. The sector is far ahead of K-12 education in terms of bringing together various sources of revenue—parental fees, tax credits, vouchers, and direct subsidies to preschools—to yield a diverse and colorful range of locally controlled organizations. My work asks about the benefits and possible inequities resulting from this pro-choice institutional arrangement. When asked to summarize a series of empirical studies, I argue that when subsidies are targeted to poor and working class families *and* when minimal regulation of quality is in place,

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family access to preschools is fairly equal and quality is quite evenly distributed across diverse communities within many states.

Despite this long line of work and my empirical arrival at a point that specifies when and how pro-choice policies can be largely effective, my critics ironically claim that I am "anti-choice" and "biased." It is the fact that my critics are uninformed that I find disappointing. It makes me feel that I must be extremely careful before uttering anything that might sound pro-choice, since advocates will take little care to read my findings thoughtfully or with much attention to fine points. It says to me that some members of the academic community have such a fervent political agenda that empirical findings make little difference in adjusting their thinking.

No member of our research team is naive about the intensity of the polemics surrounding these issues. The choice question evokes larger than usual doses of argumentation and venom. The debate is enmeshed in how the role of government is recrafted and how we balance a brittle public interest against the individualistic instincts of some American families who are rightfully worried about how their youngsters will get ahead. The localized interests of ethnic groups continue to challenge how we define the public interest, ranging from affluent whites looking for safety

In his response, Professor Fuller mentions a Wall Street Journal *piece by Professor Paul Peterson, in which Peterson praises a voucher program in San Antonio. Fuller claims Professor Peterson did not consider all the relevant data before touting the program's impact on student achievement. Peterson has asked for an opportunity to respond to Professor Fuller's comments.*

Mr. Fuller would do well to read my *Wall Street Journal* piece carefully. In the paragraph immediately following the one Fuller quotes, I say, "These findings are *less than definitive*... But *if taken at face value*, they *suggest* that voucher programs, in order to be effective for low-income, inner-city families, need to include religious schools."

Fuller's concern for selection effects in San Antonio contrasts sharply with his disregard for selection effects in the state-funded choice program in Milwaukee. In his news release of July 13, 1995, "Studies Show School Choice Widens Inequality," he quotes Richard Elmore as saying "Thousands of children have participated in Milwaukee's public-private voucher experiment over the past three years, yet we see no discernible gains in learning." Fuller and Elmore do not qualify their conclusions with any reference to "sharp selection effects." Yet the study by Wisconsin Professor John Witte, included in their report and upon which the quoted conclusion depends, fails to take into account the particularly disadvantaged character of the student population participating in the Milwaukee program.

The Witte findings upon which Fuller and Elmore depend did not take into account parental education, parental occupation, welfare dependency, whether the household is headed by one or two parents, a student's native language, and whether a student has severe social problems. The control for family income is woefully imprecise.

Before entering choice schools, students had lower test scores and greater problems with public school than those who remained in public schools. They were more likely to be from particularly low-income families headed by a single parent. Their families were especially likely to be welfare dependent. They probably came from homes in which English was less likely to have been spoken.

racial isolation, to inner-city Hispanics looking for safety and a sense of control over how their children grow up.

The political battle will persist. Yet university-based scholars and professional educators truly interested in the human effects of choice should tirelessly press for clear and carefully analyzed evidence. Let the politicians argue about political rights and weave their intriguing tales. We have the crucial and painstaking task of carefully determining which educational policies work, which fail to touch parents and kids, and why.

For more information on Who Chooses, Who Loses? Culture, Institutions, and the Unequal Effects of School Choice *(Teachers College Press, New York), fax Professor Fuller at (617) 496-3095.*

Interpreting the Harvard "Study" on School Choice

By Terry M. Moe

Bruce Fuller is a reasonable guy whose professional values are in the right place. He believes in his own research—which, in point of fact, is fairly sympathetic to choice—and he feels that a one-sided blast by choice advocates does not do justice to the Harvard volume he has recently edited with Richard Elmore. I understand his frustration. But I also think the critics make some important points and that Fuller's response does not take them seriously enough.

First, some background. The Harvard volume was unveiled to the media with much fanfare, accompanied by a news release—a summary that was surely either written or approved by the editors themselves—which clearly indicated that the basic thrust of the study was negative. Choice is popular, they found, but it leads to social inequalities, fails to yield consistent gains in learning, and should be regarded with skepticism by policymakers. Major newspapers around the country soon followed with high-profile stories telling the American public that, according to an important new study out of Harvard, school choice does not work and promotes serious problems.

Pioneer Institute responded by gathering a panel of pro choice experts to offer comments on the Harvard volume. The purpose was not to launch a probing, comprehensive evaluation of the details of each empirical chapter, nor to provide a representative cross section of academic reactions to the book. The purpose was simply to set the record straight and, in so doing, to encourage a more balanced and better informed debate about choice.

I will not try to cover all the issues here, but several matters deserve to be highlighted.

The editors try to pull these disparate efforts together by suggesting that they point to a reasonably coherent and essentially negative perspective on choice. But the evidence contained here could easily, and with every justification, be interpreted much more positively.

(1) The Harvard volume does indeed emphasize the negative aspects of choice and downplay the positive. The negative spin is quite apparent in the editors' news release, which introduced their book to the public. It is also apparent in their summary chapter, co-authored by Elmore, who is an open critic of choice. And it is apparent in the title the editors consciously adopted for their new book: *Who Chooses, Who Loses? Culture, Institutions, and the Unequal Effects of School Choice*. Fuller should not be surprised at the reaction of choice proponents. Their perception of the book's themes and packaging is accurate.

(2) The Harvard "study" is not really a study in the usual sense of the term, and should not be presented as such. A study is a coordinated research effort in which the various components are interdependent and consciously designed to promote a systematic investigation of a particular problem. In this case, the edi

This, I think, is the flat-out truth of the matter: current choice programs do sometimes lead to inequities, but these problems are rooted in bad designs and can be mitigated through better ones.

tors simply arranged a conference by inviting researchers who were already involved in their own projects; these people came and presented papers on their separate projects; and the papers were collected into one volume. The volume is just the proceedings of the conference, with an introduction and conclusion added by the editors. The public relations blitz out of Harvard labeled this exercise a "two year long research project" and said that Fuller and Elmore "coordinated the research team." This is inflated and misleading.

(3) The outcome of this "study" could have been predicted with fair accuracy before the conference was even held. The reason is that the most visible, most widely influential invited participants were known to be critical of choice. Much of their research was already underway (or finished) and known to emphasize negative themes. Would anyone, for instance, expect Valerie Lee to write an article that reflects positively on choice? What about Amy Stuart Wells, Jeffrey Henig, or John Witte who, while more balanced in their analyses than Lee, have all spent years mapping out their criticisms of choice-based reforms? A conference built around these people is unlikely to yield any surprises, or to impress choice proponents as a dispassionate "research project" whose conclusions are driven purely by new evidence.

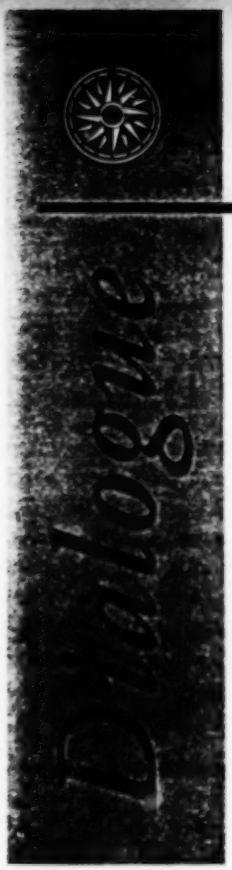
(4) I have read every chapter of the Harvard volume. They have little in common, and any serious effort to evaluate their quality or significance would have to be done quite separately for each chapter. The editors try to pull these disparate efforts together by suggesting that they point to a reasonably coherent and essentially negative perspective on choice. But the evidence contained here could easily, and with every justification, be interpreted much more positively. In particular, the editors (and chapter authors) could have noted that their main reservation about choice—the inequities that result when better-educated parents (even among the poor) take greater advantage of choice opportunities than other parents do—arise from problems in the way these programs are designed, and could be dealt with effectively through appropriate changes in design. This, I think, is the flat-out truth of the matter: current choice programs *do* sometimes lead to inequities, but these problems are rooted in bad designs and can be mitigated through better ones. Interestingly enough, the editors and authors actually try to stress the importance of design. But they do not follow through on this. And for some reason they feel compelled to treat inequities as permanent and damning properties of choice systems, rather than going ahead to argue, as their own logic would seem to require, that good designs can go a long way toward eliminating these problems.

In conclusion, I should simply emphasize that the "facts" marshalled by these studies are not in themselves troubling for choice and its supporters. There are clearly important advantages to choice, and there are clearly problems associated with existing programs. For the most part, the Harvard volume recognizes specific advantages and problems that I can agree with. On the brute facts, I do not think we differ too much.

On the brute facts, I do not think we differ too much. We differ on the interpretation. Theirs is highly negative, and in my view there is no good justification for it.

We differ on the interpretation. Theirs is highly negative, and in my view there is no good justification for it.

In both politics and social science, it is the interpretation that ultimately has influence, not the brute facts. So it is important that these issues of interpretation be discussed and debated, and that all of us try to work our way toward the truth, whatever it may be. Pioneer Institute's critique of the Harvard volume, Fuller's response, and my reaction to Fuller are all legitimate and useful parts of that process. With any luck, there will be much more to come.



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School Choice: A Marketplace for Education

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